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857 ball game of China. It has several advantages for the
524 Chinese, for it can be played on a small piece of ground, which is often all that is available, and it does not require the special boots needed for football, which few Chinese schoolboys could afford. In most parts of China the ground is hard and dry for a large part of the year, and any game such as Rugby Football, or Association, in which the players are likely to fall, or be barged down, is dangerous unless played on a specially softened and prepared ground, and that of course is rarely available. Basket ball, introduced by the schools and also played by soldiers in barracks, is thus the only foreign game known to the Min Chia.

857 When a boy or girl is seven years old schooling begins.
872 Before that, in well-to-do families, the child will have already been taught the elements of writing and have begun to learn to read. During the school years most children live at home, only those who attend the Middle Schools and come from distant villages, boarding at the school. Although elementary education is widespread, only a small proportion of boys, and still fewer girls go on to the
883 Middle School. At thirteen or fourteen school ends for
874 most boys, and they either begin to do full time work on the land, or are apprenticed to a tradesman. The apprentice system is only followed in the city, for in the villages there is no trade but agriculture or lake fishing. The apprentice may be engaged at any age over fourteen years, and is bound to serve his master for four years. In return he must be taught the craft, fed, lodged in the shop, and given a new suit of coat and trousers every New Year's day. He receives no pay during these years, but he shares in the family festivities, and on the occasion of the festival of the God of Wealth, locally known as the Golden Armoured God (Chin Chia Ts'ai Shen), when the merchants picnic near the God's temple outside the west gate, the appren-

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tices are given a real feast with as much pork, chicken, delicacies and wine as they can stuff away. 883 874

The peasant boy begins to work as a herd before he is strong enough to do field work. Oxen, water buffalo, and sheep are usually left in charge of small boys of eight or nine years, who spend the day with their charges on the slopes of the mountain, or by the shore of the lake among the willow groves, playing the flute, or astride the broad back of the good-tempered water buffalo, wallowing in the shallows of the lake. The animals are allowed to graze on the narrow dykes between the rice fields, but under the watchful eyes of their young herdsmen the well-trained beasts never dare to wander into the tempting unfenced crops on either side. The complete control which a small boy exercises over a huge water buffalo in these circumstances, though it does not seem strange to the Min Chia, astonishes visitors who know the ways of domestic animals in other lands. The lazy, sunny days on the back of a water buffalo must seem in retrospect a golden age to the young Min Chia when he has grown old enough to do the hard unceasing work on the land, wading through thick mud when ploughing, or hoeing the roots out of the heavy black soil of the drained fields. 883 462

The peasant girl begins to work at the same age, or earlier than her brother. Apart from helping the older women at the domestic tasks, the young girls carry loads of produce to the market, and at an early age, thirteen or fourteen, they are left in charge to sell this and bring the proceeds home at night. This free and independent life spent all day in the busy scenes of a town street, or a village market place away from the supervision of parents gives the Min Chia girl a self confidence and assurance rarely found in the women of eastern countries, and is at once a proof of, and a tribute to, the good sense of the Min Chia mothers and the good

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883 462 manners of the men. A girl is perhaps not as unprotected and alone as she seems, for if any young man attempted to insult her or misbehave, the other women present and the older men would at once put a stop to it. The Min Chia, although a lively, talkative and gay people, have an admirable code of public behaviour and an innate sense of decorum.

Girls and women do other heavy work, made possible by the fact that they never had the Chinese custom of foot [482] binding. A large part of the porterage of goods from the lake shore to the city and from Hsia Kuan is done by women and girls, who also do most of the grass cutting on the higher slopes of the mountain. They assist in the handling [533 461] of boats, and in planting rice fields. This work is usually done by a group of girls working together, who beguile the time by singing improvised songs, always using the same traditional tune. The same kind of song, to the same tune with its prolonged falling final note, is sung by boatmen and by grass cutters on the mountain, and, while the tune is always the same the words are made up for the occasion.

582 When a girl is seventeen years old, or a boy nineteen to twenty, the Min Chia consider it time for them to marry. In practice they will already have been betrothed since childhood and the only thing to be decided is the day which, in accordance with the horoscope of the engaged 583 pair, is most suitable and auspicious for the marriage. The betrothal, which is sometimes concluded when the children are quite small, is arranged by a marriage-broker, usually an elderly woman or man acquainted with both families, for the future bride and groom must never meet before the marriage, and it is not considered good taste for the two families to negotiate directly. The marriage-broker receives no fee for his trouble, but he acts as president of the marriage feast, and is usually the kind of person who